

Preface

Many sangha members and especially the priests-in-training at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center become interested in the history of Soto Zen within the larger history of Buddhism as an important focus of their spiritual practice. Since MZMC is a Soto Zen center, sangha members become interested in questions like, What is the history of Soto Zen? Where did it originate and when? Which teachers are associated with its origin and development? How is Soto Zen similar to or different from other forms of Buddhism? How and when did it develop in North America? What are Soto Zen's central teachings? *Soto Zen* provides answers to questions like these in the form of short primers whose intent is to supplement classroom or other small group instruction, and the study of individual sangha members.

Since the primers are intended to aid instruction, and because only one or two of the primers will be used at a time in a course, each is treated as a self-contained unit with its own set of notes and references (in contrast to the usual practice of including notes and references at the end of the text). The notes and references are included to enable further study of a topic for those interested in doing so.

The ten topics in this text are briefly reviewed below.

Early Buddhism. As used here, early Buddhism refers to the time between the birth of Gautama Buddha to about 150 years after his death; the terminal date marks the splitting of early Buddhism into sects or schools, which appears to have taken place in c.231 BCE. If the Buddha died somewhere between 410 and 370 BCE, the period would stretch roughly between 470 and the 220s BCE. Among the basic teachings of the Buddha introduced in the primer are the Dharma as a Middle Path, the eightfold path, the

four noble truths, the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination, the five skandhas, and the three characteristics of existence.

Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana (the greater vehicle) is one of two main branches of contemporary Buddhism, the other being Theravada Buddhism. It is called the greater vehicle because it maintains that its way offers liberation to all beings, not just monks. Among the doctrinal beliefs of the Mahayana reviewed in the primer are the universality of buddhanature, the bodhisattva ethic, the doctrine of emptiness, the nature of a Buddha, awakening versus nirvana as an ideal, the use of skillful means, and the transfer of merit. The primer also briefly reviews Mahayana sutras and philosophical schools.

Madhyamaka Buddhism. Madhyamaka (the Middle Way) is one of the two main philosophical schools of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, the other being Yogacara Buddhism. At its core, Madhyamaka is an attempt to set forth with logical rigor a view of the nature of phenomena. According to this view, all possible things, both internal (a concept in your mind, for example), and external (the chair you are sitting on, lets say) are empty of an intrinsic nature of their own because they are dependently co-arisen. The logical method of the school is most directly laid out in Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, which is considered by many the most renown and profound philosophical text in Buddhism. The primer traces the history and development of the school, and its key principles and approaches.

Yogacara Buddhism. Yogacara is the second of the two main philosophical schools of Indian Mahayana Buddhism. Its system of philosophy and psychology was so influential during the middle of the first millennium CE that most schools of Mahayana Buddhism drew upon it in creating their own doctrinal systems, including Zen. At the

heart of Yogacara is the belief that our mind constructs our experiences. The primer reviews the history and the development of the school, its key teachings, and how to practice from a Yogacara perspective.

Development of Chan (Zen) in China. Chan (J. Zen) took form as a Buddhist tradition over a thousand year period in medieval China (ca. 200-1200 CE). The primer reviews this development through five periods: Early Buddhism in China (ca. 100-500 CE), Proto-Chan (ca. 500-600), Early Chan (ca. 600-900), Middle Chan (ca. 750-1000), and Song-Dynasty Chan (ca. 950-1300). The primer then summarizes trends in the historical development of Chan Buddhism in China.

Huayan Buddhism. A major but short-lived school of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, Huayan (Flower Garland, also Hua-Yen) is a highly abstract explanation of the nature of the world and how to attain enlightenment within that world. It is generally considered a highlight of Mahayana thinking in China and is gaining recognition more generally in world philosophy today. It proposes that all phenomena interpenetrate and are mutually contained in each other, a notion based on the Avatamsaka Sutra. The primer reviews the school's history and development, key teachings, and practices.

Practicing with Koans in Soto Zen. Koans are brief, seemingly enigmatic, illogical statements, nonsensical questions, or otherwise puzzling dialogues or anecdotes that are among the best-known and distinctive characteristics of Zen (Chan). This primer reviews the history of koans as a literary genre in Buddhism and their use in Soto Zen, the tradition of Zen practiced at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. It also provides three examples of the use of koans in actual practice.

Soto Zen in Japan. Since the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center (MZMC) is a lineage within the international Soto Zen Buddhist school, members of the MZMC sangha should have some familiarity with the school as it first appeared and developed in Japan. The primer introduces the physical geography of Japan and then traces the development of Soto Zen in Japan through five periods: Origins of Buddhism in Japan (ca. 552-1185), the Medieval Period (1185-1603), Transition to the Modern Era (1603-1867), the Early Modern Era (1868-1945), and Soto Zen in Japan Since 1945.

Dogen Zenji. Dogen (1200-1253), founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism in Japan, is a renowned writer, philosopher, poet, and Buddhist priest. He is recognized today as one of Japan's most innovative and profound thinkers, and its greatest Zen teacher. Although relatively unknown during his lifetime and for hundreds of years afterward, his works are now a focus of intense international study following their rediscovery in the early twentieth century. This primer reviews Dogen's life, teachings, and legacy. An appendix introduces nine of his teachings available in English translation.

Soto Zen in North America. This primer separates the arrival and development of Soto Zen in North America into four phases; the initial importation of Buddhism into North America, of which Soto Zen was only a small part; the arrival of Japanese Soto Zen priests who established Soto Zen centers for (primarily) educated, white Americans; the eventual leadership (for the most part) of those centers by those same white Americans; and thoughts on the future of Soto Zen in North America.

As is evident, the primers proceed through time from the origins of Buddhism, to the development of Soto Zen (Chan), and finally to the movement of Soto Zen into North America.

Although the primers in this book are at an introductory to low intermediate level, many students at MZMC find it useful to approach the primers only after gaining background in Buddhist studies in two or three courses, or after fairly extensive reading about Buddhism but at a still introductory level. It also helps to have a dictionary of Buddhist terms on hand, such as Damien Keown's *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (2003, Oxford University Press).